

The Savior: Harriet Tubman

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In the mid 1800s many people risked their lives daily to help slaves living in the South. It was a bold thing to do, but these caring men and women were ready to take the risk so others could be free. In 1835, the Underground Railroad became an endeavor that provided an opportunity for slaves to find freedom. Besides offering slaves food and shelter, these courageous men and women put their own lives at risk, helping the mistreated and abused blacks discover freedom on their long journey to the North.

Born a slave in Maryland in 1820, Harriet Tubman was one of the most famous and remarkable conductors of the Underground Railroad. She was a conductor, traveling to and from the North nearly twenty times, freeing over 300 slaves in ten years. The Illinois Central Railroad was most commonly used as an escape route for runaway slaves all throughout the Civil War. Harriet Tubman made the most of the Illinois Central Railroad, by leading slaves along trails in eastern Illinois. Even though Harriet Tubman's plan was well thought out, she knew it would be extremely difficult for the slaves to escape. First, the slaves must escape the slaveholder, which would require the slaves to use their own resources. They were well aware if they wanted to escape, they would need to wait until nightfall. The conductors guided the runaways ten to twenty miles to the next "station," an abolitionist's home where they were offered food, shelter, and a warm bed. The slaves' most common routes on the Underground Railroad were along the Ohio and Mississippi River leading to the North. Although the terrain was rough and often dangerous, many amazing and audacious people offered to help the fugitive slaves.

These included Frederick Douglass, John Whitter, Josiah Henson, and, Tomas Garret. They gave slaves food and clothing along the way and accompanied them if needed. The expedition was very dangerous; therefore, many of the conductors carried weapons. Tubman too carried a rifle with her on her expeditions. The slaves sometimes became so frightened they considered turning back, but Tubman knew that they would never forgive themselves so she threatened them, “you’ll go on or die!” These were harsh words, but it was a harsh journey.

Harriet Tubman was a remarkable woman who was selfless, caring, and devoted to everything she did. She knew the dangers she was facing during her journeys, and knew, if she were caught, what her fate would be. But, she never let those thoughts get in the way; she devoted over fifteen years of her life helping slaves escape from a life of abuse and mistreatment.

When Tubman was a young girl, she began working as a house servant for a local farmer. Several years later, at the age of eleven, Tubman was in a general store when the owner became furious with another slave and threw a two-pound weight striking Harriet in the head. She suffered continually from severe headaches and seizures, but still remained determined to pursue her mission in life, freeing the enslaved. Until 1849 Harriet worked as a slave under the control of her plantation owner until one night, with the help of a white woman, she escaped to Philadelphia. As a free woman, Tubman was able to find work, but later returned to Maryland to help free the rest of her family. However, when she returned, she was deeply disturbed to discover that her husband had married another woman. Nevertheless, she still forged ahead, remaining faithful to her mission. Many years later, in 1862 she became not only a spy for the North, but also an

anti-slavery orator. In 1865 she decided to rescue additional slaves from the southern plantations. Because of her knowledge of the trails, tunnels and secret routes leading all throughout the state of Illinois and several others, she made an exceptional spy for the North. Once Harriet had enough information on the enemy, she informed the northern government of their strengths and weaknesses, eventually helped the North during the Civil War.

In 1850 legislation formerly known as the Fugitive Slave Act became law. Also known as part of the Compromise of 1850, it stated that Texas was no longer a free state, and that owning slaves in California and slave trading in the District of Columbia was illegal. The compromise increased the use of the Underground Railroad since all escaping and freed slaves could be sought after and returned to the owner, including those who had been free up to five years. After the Fugitive Slave Act passed, many conductors took refuge in towns like Chicago. Freed African Americans were able to watch over the town, throughout the night, alerting slaves and conductors of any approaching enemies. This worried those involved in helping runaway slaves. If the conductors were caught, or turned in by another party, they could be fined, sent to jail, or even killed.

The Underground Railroad was a movement that tore at the souls of all those involved. These men and women were an inspiration with their courage and dedication and wisdom. There is hope for all of us to follow the pattern that they have set forth.

[From Fergus M. Bordewich, *Bound for Canaan*; Catherine Clinton, *Harriet Tubman The Road to Freedom*; Glennette Tilley Turner, *The Underground Railroad*; Elaine Landau, *Fleeing to Freedom On The Underground Railroad*; The Staff of National Geographic

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